

Ralf Heimrath and Arndt Kremer (eds.) (2015) *Insularity: Small worlds in linguistic and cultural perspectives*, Würzburg, Königshausen & Neumann. 248pp, ISBN: 978-3-8260-5540-9. US\$42.50.

The title of this volume suggests a broad (and perhaps somewhat vague) thematic scope, promising a range of perspectives on insularity from “linguistic and cultural perspectives.” Unfortunately, the introductory chapter does little to establish a clear conceptual map of the book. Instead, it presents a loose series of reflections on insularity, written in inelegant (and sometimes incorrect) English; these include a number of inconsistent or circular arguments such as the statement that the term insularity “refers to a feature which does not exist in the surroundings of the related situation, an insular situation, a world of its own. Whoever enters or leaves this small world, he or she will find other circumstances inside or outside the borders.” Dividing the chapters into sections, Heimrath writes that one group of papers “relates to insularity in culture, social geography and Identity [*sic*],” thus treating different analytical categories as equivalent. Some of the chapter summaries contain mistakes: Heimrath’s assertion that “Fabri writes that modern Maltese is dying, currently under the influence of English” misrepresents the author’s argument. In fact, the chapter in question offers a balanced and highly interesting discussion of borrowing and code-switching from Maltese to English and vice-versa, demonstrating that Maltese has been simultaneously enriched and impoverished by borrowing words from English, and that Maltese English has adopted a range of morpho-syntactic features and lexical items from Maltese, which leads the author to the interesting conclusion that Maltese and Maltese English both serve to constitute a specific island identity for its speakers and “allow the islanders to open up to the ‘world out there’ and look beyond its shores.”

Luckily for the volume, then, the overall quality of the chapters is higher than the introduction might suggest. Lycia Sciriha and Mario Vassallo’s chapter on the surprising multilingualism of public signs in Malta (which include signs in Hawaiian and Japanese) offers interesting insights into Malta’s socio-cultural, economic, touristic and imaginative links to the global archipelago, and the authors conclude that “Malta is far from insular in this respect.” Another chapter worth highlighting is Thomas Freller’s discussion of the development of the perception of Malta from an “African island” to a “shield of Europe” in the context of the building of the fortified city of Valletta by the Order of St. John in the sixteenth century. Other contributors provide interesting information on little-known socio-linguistic situations in island contexts, such as Heimrath’s account of the gradual disappearance and digital afterlife of German in a settlement in New Zealand, which was founded by German migrants in 1863, and Gabriela Scripnic’s discussion of the discursive construction of the difficult living conditions of the underprivileged inhabitants of the Romanian Danube Delta by newspapers, politicians and the locals themselves.

While the chapters mentioned so far all address real islands and their socio-cultural environments, a number of contributors discuss so-called ‘language islands’, a metaphorical concept that typically refers to diasporic language communities surrounded by a majority of speakers of another language, usually maintaining real and symbolic connections to the linguistic homeland. As Kremer points out in one of the introductory chapters, the earlier view of the linguistic isolation of such enclaves has been replaced by an understanding that these communities “engage in constant interaction and exchange with the surrounding language areas and their autochthonous inhabitants.” Interestingly, then, the study of islands and the study of language islands seems to have undergone a comparable development, with scholars in both fields contesting the paradigm of isolation and paying attention to multiple processes of exchange. An interesting essay in this group is Kremer’s discussion of German language islands in British Palestine before and during World War II; as Kremer shows, in this case the

connection to the homeland had to be cut, and the German language itself became an imaginary homeland, dissociated from the nation. Nonetheless, German Jews came under attack for using their native language as German was considered the language of Hitler. The essays by Hermann Scheuringer and Johannes Sift offer insightful discussions of German language islands in Romania and the institutional and social contexts that have shaped their development; conversely, the essay by Alina Ganea focuses on the role of modern mass-media in the building of a Romanian-speaking community in Canada.

Despite its many well-researched and engaging contributions, however, the book would have benefited from a tighter conceptual organisation. Twelve of the sixteen essays are grouped under the vague heading of 'Insularity in Linguistic and Cultural Aspects'. The first four essays ('Introduction and Discussion of Terms') differ significantly in terms of the conceptual work they do. The liveliest discussion is provided by Godfrey Baldacchino, whose refreshing article challenges the common association between islands and smallness, and thereby one of the premises of the book itself. Arguing that "being a small island is a function of conceptualisation," Baldacchino suggests that choices to think of a given island as small, isolated or archipelagic are historically contingent and ideological; he ends by suggesting a conceptualisation of islands that aligns them with their dependence on the sea rather than with smallness. Mario Vassallo's contribution ('Insularity: Blessing or Curse?') critically interrogates five common perceptions of islandness, among them the notions of "islands as limited ecosystems" and "islands as exploitable systems"; unfortunately, however, he ends on a rather clichéd and essentialising note, stating that nissology "provides a unique vantage point to study the human spirit and the constant need of all individuals to bond with one another."

While the relevance of the collection for the study of islands varies from chapter to chapter, the book concludes with a group of articles whose metaphorical use of the island concept is rather problematic. Thus, George Cremona's study of how Maltese students learning German imagine Germany argues that the students' reductive image of Germans as blond, affluent and educated betrays an "insular mentality," leaving it entirely unclear what is meant by that. The methodology is problematic as the students were made to answer questions with a very narrow set of options to choose from ("People living in Germany are ... Blond / Dark / Everyone different"), suggesting that it might be the methodology rather than the students' attitudes that is reductive (aside from the fact that a twelve-year-old child is quite likely to have 'limited views' about other countries). Sigmund Kvam's article on differences in the translation of Norwegian and German art songs bizarrely contends that "translation of art songs plays no major role in translation theory and may therefore be characterised as an island in translation theory" (quite aside from taking for granted an association of islands with 'playing no major role', this seems rather forced), while the concluding chapter by Stavros Assimakopoulos, entitled 'The Insularity of Scientific Reasoning', suggests that the human tendencies towards cognitive efficiency and defending one's own viewpoints render scientists insular and create obstacles for truly interdisciplinary research; insularity is here equated with stasis, closed systems and conservatism.

All in all, *Insularity: Small Worlds in Linguistic and Cultural Perspectives* offers a rich (though not very coherent) panorama of different perspectives on islands and language islands; the quality of the contributions varies enormously, and several chapters are badly edited. As a contribution to the development of island studies, the collection might be considered peripheral (and in some cases irrelevant). As a series of case studies, however, it offers a wealth of detail and makes for an interesting read.

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